

Life's Important Questions

Luke 9:18-26

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The three important questions of life are: number one, who is Jesus?; number two, why did He come?; and number three, what does He require of us?

Why is it important to answer these questions about Jesus? Let me put it like this: to be wrong about Jesus is to be wrong about God. You can't be wrong about Jesus and right about God. If you don't have your Christology—your doctrine about Christ—correct, if you don't understand why He came—His work—if you don't understand what He requires of you in following Him, then it will affect your life now and for all of eternity.

1 John 2:23 says, "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also." So if you reject Jesus, if have a wrong Jesus or if you don't have the Jesus of the Bible, the true Jesus, you don't have God the Father. And if you don't have God, you don't have salvation. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." So it is absolutely essential that we be right about Jesus.

There are some important, doctrinal truths that we must understand in order to be followers of Christ and to have the right Jesus of the Bible.

Question number one is: who is Jesus Christ? We could spend days on this subject of Christ. But the answer to that question is found in Luke 9:18-20 of our text. "And it happened, as He..."—that is, "Jesus"—"...was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them, saying, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?'" So the first question that He posed to His disciples was, "What is the popular opinion as to who I am?" There are many different opinions as to who Jesus is. "So they answered and said, 'John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered and said..."—this is an abbreviated statement—"...'The Christ of God.'"

In Matthew 16:16, it says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." So as you compare these two passages, the full statement that Peter made is in Matthew 16:16. This is the statement that Peter made as to who Jesus Christ is.

Now notice in verse 18 of our text, Jesus was "alone praying, that His disciples joined Him." You don't get this in Luke's Gospel, but He was actually in the area of Caesarea-Philippi, way to the north in Israel. It's not far from the base of Mount Hermon. The headwaters of the Jordan River come out of the ground there. There is a massive slab of rock there.

So Jesus was alone with His disciples, and from the text we see that He wanted them to know who He was and why He came. This is Christ's own self-revelation to His disciples as to His

purpose in coming and who He was in His person. So here we get some insight that is very, very important.

Jesus was “alone praying.” A little footnote to this is that Luke’s Gospel emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. Thus it shows the prayer life of Jesus. Because Luke focuses a lot on the humanity of Christ, it is one of the Gospels that has more to say about Christ’s prayers than any of the other Gospels in the Bible.

The question Jesus poses, “Whom do you say I am?” is an important question. And “What is the popular opinion and the consensus?” Some said He was “John the Baptist.” That view was that, like John, Jesus was a preacher, who preached repentance. So He was a common preacher.

The second view was that He was “Elijah.” Elijah was predicted to come in Malachi 4:5, in the last book of the Old Testament. It says, “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” So before Jesus Christ comes back, the Jews had this prophecy that Elijah would come. My guess is it will be fulfilled during the time of the tribulation. In Revelation in the chapter where the two prophets were mentioned, I believe the two prophets may be Moses and Elijah. That would fulfill the prophecy of Malachi.

Even today, in a good Jewish family when they have their Seder feast, always has an empty chair at the table for Elijah, in light of this prophecy, waiting for him to come. Someday he’ll show up and blow their minds. But it won’t be until after the rapture and during the tribulation, and then Christ comes back in His Second Coming glory.

The third view, in verse 19, was that Jesus was “one of the old prophets.” So they viewed Jesus as just one of the many prophets who had come.

Now today there are a lot of similar views to those that were popular during Jesus’ time. The list could be extensive. Some people say that Jesus is fiction, that He never existed. I’ve talked to people who say, “I don’t believe there ever was a Jesus Christ. He never really existed in history.” Obviously that is insane, because it’s clear from the Scriptures that He existed. Even Josephus, a historian of the times, mentions Jesus. He doesn’t use the name “Jesus,” but clearly mentions this man from Galilee, who performed these miracles in reference to Jesus Christ. So to reject the Jesus of history is just not intellectual or smart at all.

Then there are others who go a step further and say, “Well, He is just a moral teacher; a man, not God, not the Messiah, not the Savior of the world. But He taught a lot of good things.” Even non-Christians quote Jesus; especially popular among them is, “Love your neighbor.” But they just put Him in the category of being a good, moral teacher.

But Jesus claimed to be God. C.S. Lewis points out so eloquently that anyone who claims to be God, his claim is either true or false. There are no other options. Jesus claims to be equal to the Father, and that claim is either true or false. If His claim is true, then He is more than just a good, moral teacher. If His claim is false, either He knew it was false and He is a liar, or He

didn't know it's false and He's a lunatic, He's deluded. So the only options you have for Jesus are liar, lunatic or Lord; take your pick.

To say He's a good, moral teacher isn't applicable; anyone who claims to be God, His claim is either true or false. You have to say, "Yes, He is God," or "No, He isn't God." If He isn't, then He knew it and He lied, or He thought it was true and was deluded and crazy.

Then some say that Jesus is just a religious leader. He's a prophet. The Muslims say that Jesus is a prophet on a par with Moses and Muhammed. They don't believe that Jesus died for our sins, that Jesus is coming back. He was just a prophet. And all the cults today deny His deity and don't believe that He came to save us from our sins.

The question really isn't what people think. If you want to know who Jesus is, you won't get it in a National Geographic magazine, a National Geographic special or a PBS special. The four books I highly recommend you read about Jesus are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Then when you finish those, read Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians...read the Bible, if you want to know about Jesus Christ.

So we want to know who Jesus said He was. We want to know who His apostles said He was. And we want to know who the Word of God says that Jesus Christ was.

Now notice in verse 20—which is the real issue—"He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" Some people answer that, "Well, my history teacher says...", "My professor says...", "My friend says...", "National Geographic says..." or "The liberal theologians say..." But the important question is, "Who do you say Jesus is?"

Verse 20, "Peter answered and said, 'The Christ of God.'" The word "Christ" in the New Testament is the equivalent of the word "Messiah" in the Old Testament. And both "Christ" and "Messiah" mean "the Anointed One." So in this verse, very clearly stated, Jesus is the "Mashiach," the Messiah, the Anointed One, the promised deliverer, the one who came to rescue and save His people. He is the Son of David, the Messiah.

This word "Christ" is not His last name; a lot of people think His name is "Jesus Christ." No; it's His title, who He is. He's the Anointed One, the Messiah.

But if you compare Matthew 16:16 with our text, Peter made a fuller statement about Jesus. He said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That is a reference to His deity or His divine nature; Jesus is "the Son of the living God." He is the Messiah and He is the God in flesh.

So if you were to ask me who Jesus is, I would say that He is the Messiah and He is the God-man. He came in flesh as God to save us from our sins. That is what the Bible teaches about the person of Jesus Christ.

Now when Peter made that statement, Jesus said to him, in Matthew 16:17, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in

heaven.” So this was a revelation given to Peter by God the Father. This is what God the Father says about God the Son: He is the Messiah, “the Son of the living God.”

Notice that Jesus didn’t rebuke Peter for what he said. Jesus didn’t say, “No, Peter, I’m not the Messiah. No, Peter, I’m not the Son of God. Peter, that’s blasphemy; that’s wrong.” Rather, Jesus affirmed that He is the Son of God, the Messiah.

And to give you the full account, Jesus went on to say, “On this rock...”—on that which Peter had just professed, that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God”—“...I will build My church.” The church is not built on Peter; it is built on his confession. It’s not built on a man; it’s built on Jesus Christ, that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Then Jesus goes on to say, “...and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” He’s talking about His church. I don’t care what goes on in the world around us, Jesus is building His church today, and the gates of hell won’t prevail against it.

So Jesus is the Mashiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God, the one who has come to save us from our sins.

Theologians call the deity of Christ and the humanity of Christ the “hypostatic union,” two natures, human and divine, in one person, Jesus Christ. He is the God-man. Jesus had to be God and man to save us; He had to be a sinless man, obedient to the law to redeem man, and He also had to be God in order to save us and bring us back to the Father. So He had to die, which is His humanity, and He had to save us, which is His deity.

In John 1:1, it says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In the Greek, it’s even stronger: “...and God was the Word.” There are three things said about Jesus here: “In the beginning was the Word” means that Jesus is the eternal Word. Jesus is God because He never had a beginning and He never has an end; He always is. He is the great I AM. Jesus said, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” So He is the eternal Word. When time began, when creation came into existence through the Son, He was there.

Then Jesus also was “with God.” That indicates that He is the personal Word. He’s not just some inanimate force or power out there in the universe; He’s a personal being, the Son was with God the Father. So we have the basis for our Trinity. One God in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. John 1:1 is a great affirmation of the triune nature of God. “The Word was with God.” We don’t have three gods; we have one God in three Persons.

Then the third thing in John 1:1 that is so important is that it says in very clear language, “...and the Word was God” or “...and God was the Word.” So we have the eternal Word, the personal Word and we have the divine Word. That is Jesus’ deity.

In John 1:14, it says, “And the Word...”—or “the logos, the revelation of God”—“...became flesh and dwelt among us.” It’s actually “the Word flesh became” and “pitched His tent among us.”

And John continues, "And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." John here is speaking of the Incarnation; "the Word became flesh."

So anything less than this is not the Jesus of the Bible. Jesus, the Second Person of the Godhead, came to earth. He took on humanity through the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Spirit of God came upon her and there was conception in her womb. I believe that the Bible is clear that Jesus was born of a virgin. If you take the virgin birth out of Christianity, you don't have Christianity, because you don't have a divine Savior. You would just have a human Jesus dying on the cross. So in the womb, the humanity and deity of Jesus were fused together for all eternity.

And now He is in heaven as the exalted God-man. He still bears the scars of our redemption. Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [Him]," the God-man.

Philippians 2:6 says that Jesus, "being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form..."—the Greek word is "morphe"—"...of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men." Here we see His full deity and His full humanity in one man, Jesus Christ.

When Jesus rose from the dead and Thomas was with the other disciples, Jesus said to Thomas, "Look at my hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." Then Thomas said to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

The cults deny the deity of Christ. I was speaking to some Jehovah's Witnesses who came to my front door, and I read them that statement of Thomas'. They said, "Well, Thomas was just so shocked to see Jesus that he said, 'Oh, my God!'" He was just freakin' out. Jesus would have rebuked him if he weren't correct; He would have said, "Thomas, that's blasphemy!" Instead, Thomas was worshipping Jesus. He was saying, "My Lord and my God!" and Jesus didn't correct Thomas for saying that.

Titus 2:13 says we're "looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." That's the blessed hope that Jesus will come again.

So anything less than the full, sinless humanity and the deity of Christ in one person, Jesus Christ, is not the Jesus of the Bible.

The second question we ask is in verses 21-22: why did Jesus come? Why did God become a man in the womb of the virgin, live a sinless life and die on the Cross? "And He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed...'—that's His Crucifixion—"...and be raised the third day."

Jesus used a favorite title for Himself: "The Son of Man." It is a Messianic title taken from Daniel 7:13. It speaks of His humanity.

I like this passage because it answers the question, who is Jesus? He's the Mashiach, "the Son of the living God," and He came to suffer and die on the Cross. So now Jesus moves from His person to his passion, His death. He is the God-man who came to die. He was given a body in order that He might die.

Now notice in verse 22, Jesus must do these three things. He must suffer or be rejected, He must be slain—that's His Crucifixion—and He must be raised from the dead—that's His Resurrection. In Matthew 20:28, Jesus said, "The Son of Man..."—there's that term again He used for Himself—"...did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

If you want to understand Jesus, you need to understand the Cross. If you take away the Incarnation, you don't have the Jesus of the Bible. If you take away the Crucifixion, you don't have the Jesus of the Bible. If you take away the Resurrection, you don't have the Jesus of the Bible. You don't have a Savior.

The essence of the Cross can be stated in one word: substitution. It means He took our place, He died in our stead. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him," the Bible says. So He died a substitutionary death. It was a voluntary, vicarious and victorious death. He died to pay for our sins, the sins of the whole world. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." He died for our sins upon the Cross. That's the reason why Jesus came.

Two other words that are important to understand about the Cross are "redeem" and "reconcile." Jesus died on the Cross to redeem us. We were sold as slaves into sin, and Jesus came to buy us and to set us free. He also came to reconcile us. We were estranged from God, and He died to bring us back to God. In the Bible, reconciliation is always God's work for us. We can't reconcile ourselves to God; God actually reaches out and brings us to Himself in the Person on the Cross.

So when Jesus died on the Cross, He died for you and for me. He did it voluntarily and vicariously. Then He rose from the dead. He must rise from the dead. He physically, bodily, victoriously rose from the dead. He is the only one who has ever victoriously, physically risen from the dead in a glorified body, never to die again. He died a substitutionary death, rose from the dead and then ascended bodily back into heaven. That's where He is right now. He's on the seat of authority, at the right hand of the Father. And He ever lives to make intercession for us.

There is only one way to get to heaven, and that is through Jesus Christ. There is only one way to get to God the Father, and that is through Jesus Christ, because He is the God-man. He became our High Priest to bridge the gap. He was the prophet, the voice of God. What a blessing to know that Jesus Christ is the one who died for me, to reconcile and to redeem me back to God.

Here is the third question, and it ties it all together, in verses 23-26: what does He ask of me? What does it mean to be a disciple? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

So He revealed His person, He predicted His passion and now He lays down His principles of discipleship. “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man...’—there’s that title again—“...will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels.”

I want you to notice that He makes the statement of what He requires in verse 23, and then in verses 24-26, starting with the word “for,” He gives the rationale or the reason why we should deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. So this is very clear in the text what Jesus lays out, what Jesus asks in His principles of discipleship.

The first step is “deny himself.” That’s not what the world is saying. The world says, “Believe in yourself. Love yourself. Trust in yourself. Do what you want. Live your own life.” What Jesus says is the antithesis of what the world says. God’s kingdom is different than man’s kingdom. The first thing you have to do if you’re going to follow Jesus Christ is deny yourself.

What does it mean to deny yourself? When Peter was warming himself by the enemy’s fire in the courtyard of Caiaphas, Jesus was being tried after His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and a servant girl said to Peter, “You are not also one of this Man’s disciples, are you?”

Peter said, “I am not.”

“And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, ‘Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you.’ Then he began to curse and swear, saying, ‘I do not know the Man!’” So Peter denied the Lord. “I don’t know Him.”

What does it mean to deny yourself? You just completely disregard yourself. It means to forget about yourself. You don’t live for self. You don’t live for your own desires, wants, goals, ambitions and wishes. If you’re going to follow Jesus Christ, you have to die to yourself, to your goals, to your plans, to your ambitions and to your desires—they must all be laid at the feet of Jesus.

That’s not something you hear much about today. Instead we hear a lot of popular preaching that Jesus came to make you happy, He came to make you rich, He came so you can drive a really nice car, He came to make you famous—all this stuff. But Jesus came so that you, like Him, could die to yourself. We’ll see why it’s important to do that, but the first step is to die to yourself. “Okay, Jesus, I’m dead.” Die to your goals, plans and ambitions; give your life to Christ.

Secondly, notice Jesus said, “Take up his cross daily.” Say “Yes” to God and you say “No” to

yourself. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” I like that. When Jesus calls you to follow Him, He bids you to come and die.

Now what does it mean to “take up [your] cross daily”? It first means to say “No” to self and then to say “Yes” to God. It means to bear the same disdain and reproach that Christ bore as you choose to follow Him willingly. You might be rejected, ostracized, mocked and lose your friends.

I’ve heard people say, “If I give my life to Jesus, all my friends will forsake me!” Then let them forsake you. I’d rather walk alone with Jesus than be without Him in a crowd any day. He’ll give you some new friends, much better friends, people who care about you and love you as part of the body of Christ.

“Well, if I give my life to Christ, what will my husband say?” “What will my wife say? What will my friends say? What happens to my job? What about the guys when they want me to go to The Fuzzy Frog to drink after work?” I don’t know, but what option do you have? You have to deny yourself, take up your cross.

Bearing your cross doesn’t mean you have bad eyesight or a bad back or you have a bad mother-in-law. That’s not your cross to bear. Bearing your cross means bearing the disdain that is incurred by following Christ in obedience. So if you’re following Christ and being persecuted for righteous sake, then you’re bearing your cross. It’s personal, it can be painful and bearing your cross is to be perpetual, day by day. But it can also be a joyful, blessed experience.

That’s the third phase in verse 23, which is “follow Me.” It means to be obediently following Him wherever He leads. “I’ll go where You want me to go, I’ll do what You want me to do, I’ll say what You want me to say and I’ll be what You want me to be.” Are you afraid to pray that prayer? If you’re a follower of Christ, today are you brave enough and love God enough to say, “God, whatever You want from me. I’ll go wherever you want me to go (as long as it’s not Barstow). I’ll go wherever You want me to go (and Tahiti would be kind of sweet)”?

Are you willing to die to yourself? Are you willing to take up your cross? Are you willing to follow Him? Since Jesus is God, and He died to save me and rose from the dead, no price is too great to follow Jesus Christ. So He says, “Follow Me.”

In the words “Deny [yourself], take up [your] cross daily, and follow Me,” in the Greek it is in what’s called the “*eres tense*.” That means it is an experience that happens once and carries on into the future, it has an effect into the future. But the phrase, “Follow Me” is in the present tense. That means it is a daily, continual, habitual, ongoing, obedience of following Jesus Christ.

Why should we do these three things? The reasons are in verses 24-26. Number one, “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake...”—that’s the key—“...will save it.”

If I talk to anybody, especially young people today, I would say, "Lose your life for Jesus, then you'll find life." This is the paradox of discipleship. The way to find life is to lose your life. The way to lose your life is to try to find your life. They say, "I want what I want. I want to do what I want. I want to do how I want to do it. I want to live for me. I gotta' be me." And you follow your heart. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" the Bible says. So be willing to die to your goals and ambitions, and follow Jesus Christ.

Then notice in verse 25, is reason number two: "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?"

So number one, the paradox is if you try to find your life, you'll lose it. But if you lose your life, you'll find it. And secondly, if you gain the whole world and lose your soul, you've gained nothing.

If Bill Gates is not born again, he's going to take nothing with him. There are no pockets in shrouds. Have you ever seen a funeral procession that had attached to it a U-Haul trailer? No. People ask, "How much did he leave?" He left everything; he didn't take anything with him. The only way you can have riches in heaven is to store them up right now. You can gain the whole world, but if you lose your soul, it profits you nothing. So no wonder He says, "Deny [yourself], and take up [your] cross daily, and follow me."

The third reason is in verse 26: "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed..."—He's referring to Himself—"...when He comes..."—and Jesus Christ is coming again—"...in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels." So Jesus will not confess you, and you will be ashamed and not know the Lord. He will say to you, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"

So these are three reasons why you should deny yourself, you should take up your cross and you should follow Jesus Christ.

I like the words of Elizabeth Kipling in her song, Beneath the Cross of Jesus. She said in the stanza,

"I take, O cross, thy shadow

For my abiding place;

I ask no other sunshine than

The sunshine of His face;

Content to let the world go by,

To know no gain nor loss;

My sinful self my only shame,

My glory all the cross."

Jim Elliott, who was killed with his friends in Ecuador by the Aca Indians, tried to reach them for Christ. He'd been called a fool by the media here in America to try to reach those Aca Indians. But in his journal before he went to that jungle and died for Christ, he said, "No man is a fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Have you given your life to Jesus Christ? Not to give your life to Christ and not to consecrate your life to Christ is a very foolish thing.